



## Reading literature, reading text, reading the Internet: The times they are a'changing

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Perhaps one of the most significant trends to emerge during the past decade is the increasing attention that researchers and educators have devoted to the role of expository text in early literacy development. Although educators and theorists have long emphasized the importance of narrative in children's lives (Adams, 1990; Egan, 1998), a call has surfaced to give additional attention to expository or informational text in the early grades. A U.S. report last year titled *Reading at Risk* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004) made me think about the current trend toward including more informational text in primary-grade classrooms and how such a trend might affect the reading habits of our youth.

The *Reading at Risk* report presents the findings from a survey that asked adults over the age of 18 about their leisure time reading habits. The findings revealed that, in 1992, 61% of adults reported reading books (of any kind) during leisure time, while in 2002 the percentage decreased to 57%. When asked specifically if they read novels, short stories, poetry, or plays during leisure time, 57% of respondents in 1982 reported they had done so. The percentage dropped to 54% in 1992 and again in 2002 to 48%, indicating that less than half of the adults surveyed read literary works for pleasure in that year. The question then arises: Are adults reading less or are they just reading differently?

MaryEllen Vogt (2004), current president of the International Reading Association, discussed *Reading at Risk* in a *Reading Today* column last summer and encouraged teachers to explore the meaning of the report's findings. Vogt posed some compelling questions for us to consider: Does "literary reading" only refer to the great works of lit-

erature, or is there a new and evolving definition that may supersede past definitions? Are children and young adults now engaging in many kinds of literate behaviors other than those that have been traditionally considered "literary"? A look at the increasing availability of informational text, its use in classroom instruction, and the expanding role of technology in U.S. culture might provide some insights and possible answers to these questions.

### Early literacy instruction: Moving toward a balance

Reading educators have long been concerned about reading in the content areas, particularly the difficulty that some students experience around the fourth-grade level when expectations to independently negotiate content area textbooks increase. Only recently, however, have we begun to focus on the need to provide young students with exposure to, and strategic instruction in using, informational texts.

A number of studies conducted in the 1980s provided the underpinning and rationale for balancing young students' exposure to narrative and informational text. Research documented that students of all ages, from elementary to high school, experienced difficulty comprehending informational text (McGee, 1982; Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1978; Taylor, 1980). Some reading researchers speculated that the problem was rooted in young students' lack of exposure to informational text, particularly given that they encounter primarily narrative forms in picture books and television shows. Another interesting finding during this period was



that studies of international comparisons showed that students in Finland outperformed students from other countries in comprehending both narrative and informational text. A number of hypotheses have been put forth to explain Finland's reading proficiency. First, the sound-symbol relationship in the Finnish language is extremely consistent, with one letter representing one sound, making the decoding process much easier for young children to master. The second hypothesis has to do with the fact that from a very early age children in Finland are exposed to informational text, and much, if not most, of the early literacy instruction in classrooms uses informational text. An awareness of the need to introduce expository text in the early grades had begun, and interest has continued to develop in the following decades.

## Two classic studies on informational text

There is little debate that prior to the 1990s U.S. culture and classrooms favored the use of narrative with young children; however, during the 1990s, research began to turn to young children's exposure to and comprehension of expository genres (Dreher, Davis, Waynant, & Clewell, 1998; Duke, 2000; Kamil & Lane, 1997; Pappas, 1993). Pappas's (1993) landmark study raised significant questions about whether narrative text should be the primary or dominant text used with young children. In her study, kindergarten children engaged in pretend readings of two stories and two informational books, which were then analyzed to gain insight about young children's strategies in dealing with these two genres. Pappas's study revealed that young children were just as successful in reenacting the informational books as they were the stories and that they preferred the informational text. Based on the findings of her study, Pappas challenged the "narrative as primary" notion, stating that an exclusive emphasis on reading "story" in the early grades limits children's experiences with other forms of text and may create a barrier to full access to literacy.

In a study that has become a classic, Duke (2000) explored the degree to which informational texts were actually included in classrooms and in what ways. Data were collected about the types of

text on classroom walls, in the classroom library, and in classroom written-language activities. The results of the study revealed a scarcity of informational text in classroom print environments and activities. Few informational texts were included in the classroom libraries, very little informational text appeared on classroom walls and other surfaces, and a mean of only 3.6 minutes per day was spent with informational texts during classroom written-language activities. Perhaps even more revealing was the fact that the scarcity of the use of informational text was particularly acute for children in low-socioeconomic-status schools. Duke's research strongly suggested that young children in all of the classrooms she studied lacked the exposure to informational text needed to build the familiarity, comfort, and confidence required to become proficient readers of expository text in the later grades.

In discussing her results, Duke (2000) provided what I consider to be excellent advice. She cautioned that we should not attempt to increase time spent with informational text by decreasing the amount of time and attention given to narrative text. In other words, we should not pit narrative against informational text, but we should provide a balance.

## Technology: Changes in the culture of reading

At about the same time that reading research began to emphasize the need for young children to have increased exposure to informational text, another phenomenon was occurring: The computer was becoming an integral tool in U.S. classrooms and culture. The computer and the Internet have put information literally at our fingertips. Perhaps the most significant impact on reading habits for children and adults is evidenced in our quest for information. We have shifted from leafing through traditional hardback encyclopedias and other resource books to logging on and "Googling" a topic. I suspect that the flexible access the Internet provides has resulted in an increase in the reading of informational text for children *and* adults. This brings me back to my experience with the *Reading at Risk* report.

As I stated earlier, my initial interest in the *Reading at Risk* report was piqued by a print article in *Reading Today*. Vogt's discussion of the key



finding—that the reading of literary books in the United States was declining rapidly, especially among younger adults—spurred me to learn more. I went online to read the report in detail and then searched for the topic on the Internet to find what else was being said about the report in U.S. newspapers. Headlines in newspapers from New York to Seattle, Washington, included “Literary Reading in Dramatic Decline,” “Book Reading Drops,” “Fewer Noses Stuck in Books in America.” I then logged on to several blogs (Web logs, or online journals) to find out what people were saying about the survey and discovered quite a range of interesting perspectives being discussed.

I began to think about how my reading experience on the Internet differed from simply reading a traditional print version of the *Reading at Risk* report. My interest was triggered by reading traditional print (a *Reading Today* column), but it was not a traditional book as defined by the *Reading at Risk* report. Because I have Internet access, I was able to quickly find the actual report and then read related newspaper columns, as well as a variety of blogs, in order to investigate what others thought about the report. Because I used the Internet, my reading on the topic was broader and I was exposed to multiple interpretations of the report. As a result, my understanding was expanded and enriched, much more so than if I had only read the traditional printed version of *Reading at Risk*.

My reading of the *Reading at Risk* report, related newspaper articles, and websites occurred during a leisurely Sunday afternoon. Such reading would not have been reported in the *Reading at Risk* survey because not once did I read from a traditional book, and none of the text would have been considered literary. While the *Reading at Risk* report does acknowledge the contribution of electronic media in terms of information access and diversity, it also suggests that the Internet fosters short attention spans, accelerated gratification, and passive participation. Given my experience reading the report, I’d beg to differ.

## Changing times and changing texts

The reading of literature is vastly important to the cultural and intellectual development of all stu-

dents, but they need to read and derive pleasure and knowledge from expository text as well. Reading literature and other text genres can enrich the mind and the soul. In U.S. classrooms and in U.S. culture, informational text is becoming more and more important. I agree with Duke (2000)—it is not a matter of one genre or the other, but rather it is a matter of balance, and this is as true for traditional books as it is for electronic media.

The *Reading at Risk* report contains much valuable information for anyone interested in literacy, and I encourage everyone to read it. Nevertheless, I urge caution in drawing the conclusion that reading is at risk. Perhaps reading as we have traditionally defined it is at risk. It seems that an expanded definition of reading should be developed that encourages a balance between narrative and exposition, hard copy and electronic media. While there may be a decline in the reading of literary books, the *Reading at Risk* survey has not convinced me that there is a decline in overall reading. I’m eternally optimistic that reading is, and will continue to be, highly valued in U.S. culture.

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